MEETING WITH U.S. WILDLIFE AGENCIES CONCERNING THE NELSON LAGOON GRS PROJECT

April 27, 2004
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Building
Anchorage, Alaska

Attendees

Ellen Lance, USFWS
Robert Gill, USGS
Margaret Petersen, USGS
Paul Flint, USCG
Catherine Berge, USFWS
Tim Robertson, Nuka Research
Doug Burn, USFWS
Greg Balogh, USFWS
Charla Sterne, USFWS
Chris Dau, USFWS

Summary

The purpose of the meeting was to review the Geographic Response Strategy (GRS) process with fish and wildlife professionals and discuss the specific resources to be protected at Nelson Lagoon. The meeting was to facilitate spill planners/responders understanding of the habitat and biology of the wildlife to be protected and the wildlife professionals understanding the limitations of spill response tactics in protecting wildlife.

Ellen Lance opened the meeting and provided for introductions. Ellen summarized the ESA Section 7 consultation that led to this project. Tim Robertson gave a presentation on the GRS process that has been developed in Alaska and discussed the scope of work for this project. He also discussed some of the tactics that can be used to develop a GRS.

Utilizing a topographic map, nautical chart and aerial photographics, the group discussed the various wildlife and habitat at risk of oil spill impact in Nelson Lagoon. Ellen Lance will summarize the information gathered on a map of Nelson Lagoon. Because of their threatened status, the highest priority for protection will be Steller's Eiders. Other wildlife present requiring protection include Emperor Geese, shorebirds and sea otters. The blue mussel beds that serve as the primary food for the Steller's, are the most important habitat to protect. The most critical time of the year for wildlife protection is July through September when the Steller's Eiders are molting and are not very mobile. The entire lagoon in very sensitive, but there is a higher concentration of eiders and mussel beds in the eastern half of the lagoon. The most human activity (including commercial set net fishing) is concentrated in the western half of the lagoon.

Tim Robertson will explore fish habitat that needs to be protected with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the community of Nelson Lagoon.

The risks for oil spills were also discussed. The greatest risk of a catastrophic oil spill is the barge that delivers fuel to the bulk storage facility. A collision or grounding of this barge as it enters or travels inside the lagoon, could potentially release hundreds of thousands of gallons of diesel/heating oil into the lagoon. The barge only comes once a year, unless there is a shortage of fuel.

Other high risks of spills include:

- Transfer operations of the oil from the barge to the bulk storage facility,
- Tugs, fishing tenders and large fishing vessels transiting the lagoon and
- Fueling operations from fishing tenders.

These operations could possibly spill thousands of gallons of oil. These activities all occur near the dock at the Village of Nelson Lagoon or in the channel from the dock to the entrance of the lagoon. All of the higher risk activities occur in the timeframe from May to October. Very little risk occurs during the winter.

Lower risks are present from vessels transiting the coastline outside the lagoon and small fishing vessels working inside the lagoon. The chance of a vessel outside the lagoon causing an impact inside the lagoon was considered negligible. The amount of fuel carried on the small fishing vessels is so small that an effective oil spill response will not be possible.

The group also discussed relevant environmental factors. The strongest winds during the summer months come from the southeast to southwest quadrant, but lighter winds do blow from almost any direction. Winds from the south will serve to ground the oil on the south shoreline of the spit. The greatest danger of spreading oil into the lagoon occurs during a flood tide. Strong currents exist in the channels near the dock and at the entrance of the lagoon. The channels present during low tide may provide good collection points for oil. No collector beaches inside the lagoon were known by anyone in the group. Collector beaches will be furthered explored during the site survey and community meeting. Diesel/heating oil evaporates very quickly and is thus not persistent in the environment.

Oil spill response tactics were also discussed by the group. Because of the large area of the lagoon and the relative small area of spill risks, spill response tactics must occur very near the source of any spill. Protecting mobile wildlife and the vast tidal flats using fixed-boom tactics or passive recovery will not work. Containing the oil near the source of the spill or diverting it to a collection point will likely be the best tactics. Shallow-water free oil recovery teams should also be considered. Rapid response times are critical to success. Pre-deployment during the highest risk activities should be considered. The Tactics Group should explore any other tactics that may prove effective.

A priority task at the time of any spill should be to conduct an over flight to locate all wildlife in the area. It was decided that wildlife hazing would not be used as a tactic in the emergency phase of the spill response; therefore it will not be part of the GRS. Wildlife hazing would only occur after the proper permits and trained personnel are at the scene.

This GRS site will be developed as part of the ongoing Aleutians GRS workgroup process. Tim Robertson and Ellen Lance will travel to the Village of Nelson Lagoon, possibly in May, to accomplish the following:

- hold a community meeting to give information about the project and gather input from the community,
- conduct a site survey and
- over fly the lagoon for aerial photography.

A draft strategy will be completed by the 3rd quarter 2004. The draft will then be circulated for review. The Village intends submit a grant to the Denali Commission this winter, to fund any additional spill response equipment necessary to implement the GRS. Once the equipment arrives, a training/deployment will occur. The target date for the training/deployment is May 2005.

Tim Robertson will review the current oil spill contingency plans for the existing bulk fuel facility to determine what equipment and tactics are available. He will also find out what oil spill equipment is carried on the fuel barge.